A Theology of Luke and Acts

biblical theology of the New TestamentBy Darrell L. Bock

Zondervan

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Chapter One

The Context of Luke-Acts: A Short Introduction

Bibliography

For this listing I highlight the key commentaries that also have introductory discussions. Barrett, C. K. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles I: Preliminary Introduction and Commentary on Acts I–XIV.ICC. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994. Idem. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles II: Introduction and Commentary on Acts XV–XXVIII.ICC. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998. Bock, Darrell L. Acts. BECNT 5. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007. Idem. Luke 1:1–9:50. BECNT 3a. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994. Idem. Luke 9:51–24:53. BECNT 3b. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996. Bruce, F. F. The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990. Cadbury, H. J. The Making of Luke-Acts. New York: Macmillan, 1927. Fitzmyer, J. A. The Acts of the Apostles. Anchor Bible. Garden City: Doubleday, 1998. Idem. The Gospel of Luke I-IX: Introduction, Translation and Notes. Anchor Bible. Garden City: Doubleday, 1982. Green, Joel. The Gospel of Luke. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997. Haenchen, E. Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary. London: Blackwell, 1987. Hemer, C. The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History. WUNT. Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1989. Hengel, Martin. Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity. London: SCM, 1979. Jervell, J. Die Apostlegeschichte. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998. Johnson, Luke Timothy. The Gospel of Luke. SacPag. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991. Idem. The Acts of the Apostles. SacPag. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992. Marguerat, D. The First Christian Historian: Writing the "Acts of the Apostles." SNTSMS. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Marshall, I. H. The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary. TNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980. Idem. The Gospel of Luke. NIGTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978. Nolland, John. Luke 1:1–24:53. WBC. 3 vols. Dallas: Word,

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I have already presented extensive introductions to Luke-Acts elsewhere. The goal here is to present the key information that locates Luke-Acts historically, so that one can appreciate the context of the theology of the two volumes.

2.1 Authorship and Date of Luke-Acts

Four issues are key in making a judgment about the authorship and date of Luke-Acts: (1) what one makes of the consistent early church testimony from the first four centuries that Luke is the author; (2) the nature of the "we" sections in Acts; (3) the relationship of Luke to the other gospels in terms of sequence; and (4) how one takes the ending of Acts, specifically whether it is a key to the date of Acts or represents an open literary ending that cannot help us date the book. Internal features only give hints about the answers to these questions.

The internal features concentrate on two points. First, the author was not an eyewitness to most of the events in his two volumes, especially those tied to the ministry of Jesus (Luke 1:1–2). Rather, he has relied on his study of traditions, which came from "eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (Luke 1:2–4). Second, the author apparently presents himself as a companion of Paul in those parts of Acts known as the "we" sections (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16). This feature, though debated with respect to its historical reliability and its role in pointing to authorship, could limit options concerning the author's identity. If the "we" sections represent a consistent self-reference, then other scenes that name companions of Paul eliminate options for the author. The best way to consider these potential candidates is to look at the external evidence about the companions of Paul and the authorship of Luke-Acts, our first key issue.

2.1.1 Authorship of Acts

Despite the wide selection of potential candidates available as companions of Paul, the tradition of the church gives attention to only one name as the author of these volumes—Luke. This tradition was firmly fixed in the early church by AD 200 and remained so without any hint of contrary opinion. The earliest manuscript of Luke's gospel that we have is the Bodmer papyri XIV from about c. AD 200, which has a title pointing to Luke as author at its conclusion. This text is more widely known as p^{75}. A title calling the second volume the Acts of the Apostles appears at the end of the transcribing of the book in p^{74}, but no author is named there. Luke is named as the author of Acts in later manuscripts of 33 (9th cent.), 189 (14th cent.), 1891 (10th cent.) and 2344 (11th cent.). The absence of any dispute about the claim of authorship across several early centuries is a strong reason to take the tradition seriously . Allusions to the gospel may appear as early as 1 Clement 13.2 (a summary of

parts of the Sermon on the Plain of Luke 6); 48.4 (perhaps the Christian gate alludes to the image of the narrow gate in Luke 13; ca. AD 95–96); 2 Clement 13 .4 (love your enemies according to the Lucan Sermon on the Plain; ca. AD 100). In addition, a use of Jesus' teaching, as reflected in Luke 10:7, appears in 1 Timothy 5:18.

Numerous texts comment on authorship. Justin Martyr (ca. 160) in Dial. 103.19 speaks of Luke writing an "apostolic memoir" of Jesus, by alluding to language only in Luke and tying it to this expression. This association is vague and lacks specificity, but this changes with later references. The Muratorian Canon (ca. 170–180) attributes the gospel to Luke, a doctor, who is Paul's companion. Irenaeus (ca. 175–195) in Haer. 3.1.1 and 3.14.1 attributes the gospel to Luke, a follower of Paul, and notes how the "we" sections suggest the connection. It should be noted that Irenaeus probably exaggerates how close Luke was to Paul in describing him as a constant or inseparable companion (Haer. 3.14.1). Acts suggests Luke was with Paul here and there. The so-called Anti-Marcionite Prologue to Luke (ca. 175) describes Luke as a native of Antioch in Syria (Acts 11:19–30; 13:1–3; 15:30–35). It says he lived to be eighty-four years old, was a doctor, was unmarried, wrote in Achaia, and died in Boeotia . Tertullian (early 3rd cent.) in Against Marcion 4.2.2 and 4.5.3 calls the gospel a digest of Paul's gospel (he speaks of Luke as an apostolic man; authorship is also noted in 4.3; 4.5, where Tertullian notes that Marcion only uses Luke; 4.7; 4.8). The Monarchian Prologue (date disputed: either 3rd or 4th cent.) gives Luke's age at death as seventy-four. Origen (De Principiis 2.6) names Luke as the author in discussing infancy material . Finally, Eusebius (early 4th cent.) in Ecclesiastical History 3.4.2 mentions Luke as a companion to Paul, native of Antioch, and author of these volumes.

The remarks about Acts are similar. Irenaeus speaks of Luke as the author in Haer. 3.13.3. Tertullian in On Fasting 10 speaks of the Acts as a "commentary by Luke" as he discusses Peter's fasting in Acts. Added to this is Clement of Alexandria (Stromata 5.12.82.4: "Luke in the Acts of the Apostles"). These authors write in the late second and early third centuries. The Muratorian Canon names Luke in line 2 ("The third book of the Gospel is that according to Luke") and lines 34–39 ("Moreover, the acts of all the apostles were written in one book . For `most excellent Theophilus' Luke compiled the individual events that took place in his presence—as he plainly shows by omitting the martyrdom of Peter as well as the departure of Paul from the city [of Rome] when he journeyed to Spain."). So our materials point to authorship being consistently tied to Luke starting by the end of the second century.

This is where the significance of the "we sections" enters into the discussion. This material could be the most important potential internal clue to authorship of the volumes. These sections appear in 16:10–17 (Arrival in Philippi and Conversion of Lydia); 20:5–15 (From Troas to Miletus); 21:1–18 (From Miletus to Jerusalem); and 27:1–28:16 (From Caesarea to Rome). Their appearance appears to be at random parts of Acts, but this is not entirely the case. Each

text involves a sea trip, although in the case of Philippi it is a mere mention in two verses and more detail is given to the conversion of Lydia than to sea travel.

Nevertheless, the claim these are merely rhetorical descriptions and merely created for effect is undercut by the fact that the presence of the "we" figure is limited to these voyage scenes and does not extend to other key scenes where the insertion of an "eyewitness" could have added persuasive force if rhetoric alone were the concern. If one were creating presence for credibility or mere rhetorical reasons, one would not limit such references to just these moments, despite scholarly claims to the contrary. It is not compelling that these first-hand "fantasy" settings appear and are randomly connected to events that are often less central to the major Acts story line, appearing only in moments of travel. So either the "we sections" are someone's journal of these travels or they belong to the author. At the least, they point to some type of firsthand source for these scenes, even if they do not belong to the author of Acts. As such, they suggest a genre more in line with history than romance, an issue to be treated shortly. The traditional position is to attribute the "we sections" to the author and to argue they point to a companion of Paul as the writer of the volumes. The "we" of Acts ties to the "us" of Luke 1:1–2.

Ancient practice supports this understanding. Fitzmyer notes the lack of any literary precedent for a travel narrative that is a literary creation. He also challenges the idea that such conventions exist for sea voyages. Rather, as Fitzmyer argues, these notes indicate when the writer of Acts was present at some of the events being portrayed, part of the valued "eyewitness motif" in Greek historiography. Colin Hemer has challenged the important work of Vernon Robbins, who argues for a "sea voyage genre" in the "we" style and in the way Robbins has cited some scenes out of context to make his case. Hengel agrees that the volume of Acts needs to be taken "seriously as a source." Such remarks apply to the "we source" as well if its roots are in real experiences. This certainly was the early interpretation of this element of Luke, as Irenaeus testifies in Haer. 3.14.1.

The Pauline letters name some of the potential candidates who traveled with Paul: Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (Phlm 24; Col 4:14). To this list, one could add figures such as Timothy, Titus, Silas, Epaphras, and Barnabas. However, the combination of those named in Acts by the author, whoever he is (and thus distinct from himself), and this external evidence points to Luke as the companion of Paul who wrote these volumes.

It is often suggested that the name "Luke" was chosen as a means of giving apostolic credibility to a work whose real author was unknown. This argument is not as persuasive as it might initially seem. Luke's career is hardly distinctive in our early sources. He is named in passing in two texts (Col 4:14; Phlm 24). If one were to select a Pauline companion out of the hat to give prominence to a work, there are other better, more significant candidates. So

it looks more likely that Luke became associated with the book, and consistently so, because the tradition knew him to be the author of this work. One would hardly guess Luke to be the "fill in" luminary.

For example, Titus is not named in Acts, and his credentials are as extensive as Luke's resume is. Epaphras (Col 1:7; 4:12; Phlm 23) qualifies in this regard as well, as does Rufus of Romans 16:13, Sosipater of Romans 16:21, or Stephanus of 1 Corinthians 16:15–17. The point is that Luke was not the only or even the most obvious choice for a tradition to latch onto, if a name was merely to be selected for creating an associate close to Paul and not named in Acts. In fact, one could ask why the association with Paul is a requirement for the "fill in," since Peter gets as much attention in Acts as Paul does. Why not fill in with a Petrine associate or someone who knew them both? All of this points to a quality in the tradition and to the likelihood the author was known, even though the books are anonymous.

What we can know about Luke can be divided between what the NT sources tell us or imply and what comes from outside of these early sources. That Luke was a physician, was tied to Paul, was not an eyewitness of Jesus, and wrote his gospel with concern for Gentiles are facts the NT makes clear. That Luke was from Syria, proclaimed Paul's gospel, was unmarried, was childless, and died at an old age are ideas that are not in the NT. Though the differences about Luke's age at death tell us that not everything in these traditions is indisputably true, their unity regarding authorship makes almost certain the identification of Luke as the gospel's author. The tradition's testimony also makes Luke's connection to Paul likely.